

Review: 'Cabaret' at Lucky Penny: Nazi threat looms over a carefree world

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Lucky Penny Productions presents "Cabaret" running through June 16
Kurt Gonsalves/KMG Design

Lucky Penny Productions celebrates its 40th opening night in their space on Industrial Drive with a splendid production of John Van Gruten's "Cabaret."

If you're a fan of the Bob Fosse's 1972 movie version, which roundly swept that year's Academy Awards, you'll love Lucky Penny's at times risqué and at others heartfelt rendition of the famous musical.

Director Ken Sonkin has transformed Lucky Penny's intimate theater into the Kit Kat Klub, the famous, anything-goes nightclub in Berlin between World War I and II. The back stage is a black wall and blue lights illuminate the

floor. The haze Sonkin has pumped in makes for a steamy, mysterious aura, perfectly evoking a smoke-filled club, or maybe yet, a misty, gloomy Berlin where the intrigue of the city is in full effect.

The play tells the story of Cliff Bradshaw, played by a callow, innocent Ryan Hook, a writer from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, who travels to Berlin to give English lessons; and Sally Bowles, played by the incomparable Ashley Garlick, an English girl who has told her mother she is in a convent school in the south of France, but is actually the chanteuse of the seedy Berlin nightclub. Each scene is punctuated by Brian Watson's emcee, who, with a shaved head, powdered face and thick German accent, is the raconteur who makes us laugh with witty quips and bawdy jokes.

Further, fans of the movie will rejoice in Watson's emcee because his voice is much stronger, more commanding than Joel Grey's nasal, clownish sound in the movie. Watson is a sarcastic ghost, presenting his Kit Kat Girls to the audience, with all their seductive, lewd and slutty charms.

Staci Arriaga's direction of the Kit Kat Girls' dance routines is sexy, sensual and salacious. These girls have no inhibitions. They strut, squat, kick and pose, reveling in their objectification. Rebecca Valentino's costumes are lewd and naughty, and these girls have no problem bearing their bellies or thighs in the name of good theater.

The freewheeling and sexually liberated Berlin of the Weimar Republic is the frame in which Karen Pinomaki's Fraulein Schneider and Tim Setzer's Herr Schultz fall in love. Fraulein Schneider lets a room to Andrea Denison-Laufer's Fraulein Kost, a buxom, sensual lady of the night, always entertaining a sailor, chastised by Fraulein Schneider for her promiscuity. But then Kost catches Schultz emerging from Schneider's room, clearly having

just been in flagrante delicto. The moment is a triumph, given all the youthful sexuality in the play, it's nice to know that the old folks can get some too.

But alas, that innocent autumnal love affair is spoiled by the oncoming Nazi threat.

After the story and the songs, it's the actors and their voices that make the show. And make the show they do. But here, there were many little details that, when taken together, make for an all the more powerful visual experience. The entire production, costumes, sets, props are all in varying shades of grey, or black or white. Clif's suit is in grey, the Kit Kat Girls negligees are all straps of black with white tights. Sally's sometimes black, sometimes white, cocktail dresses shimmer with every pose and attitude. The fruit in Herr Schultz's fruit stand is grey and white, and even Fraulein Schneider's broom is grey.

The fair amount of work it took to accumulate such monochromatic props and costumes was to highlight one main moment in the show: the red Nazi armband that Herr Ludwig reveals when he takes off his coat at Herr Schultz and Fraulein Schneider's engagement party. The audience gave a collective gasp, as did Cliff when he saw it.

Unfortunately, Sally gets fired from the Kit Kat Klub and there are no more raunchy musical numbers to watch. We love them mainly because the transgressive bawdiness is an indulgence most are too inhibited to engage in. It's that devil-may-care sensuality for which the Weimar Republic was famous, and of which I wanted to see more.

However, we all age. Sally's youthful frivolity can't last. Time passes and we all have to grow up. When Sally turns legitimate after finding out she's pregnant, I mourned her carefree life as a nightclub chanteuse. But life isn't

like that. Sally has already had too many abortions. Cliff needs to buckle down and write his novel. A shade of deception, mistrust, xenophobia and supposed ethnic superiority squelches a free and sophisticated culture.

And that's why we're still watching this play. It's a thrilling account of the heyday and fall of a glorious decade in which anything went. But we see Nazi Germany rumble across the land like the front of a great storm.

There is no more potent example of this as in Sally's last performance. She sings the title song "Cabaret": "Life is a cabaret, old chum. Come to the cabaret." But she does so through tears. It's was a nuanced performance, filled with the despair that we all feel, not only as Sally and Cliff's relationship falls apart, but also knowing that this glorious time of Berlin between the wars is coming to an end in a dreadful way.

This is so much more than just a musical revue. It's a gripping account of the defining world tragedy of the 20th century. The innocence of a vibrant free world, lost to the arrogance and misguided power of a brutal dictator.

In the last scene, the cast is transformed into Nazi soldiers, all wearing red armbands with a black swastika. Then, for the curtain call, they rip them off and throw them to the floor. It was a rousing, defiant act that may be more a comment on the times we currently live in, than the times that have past.

Like the finish on a great wine, the play stuck with me for the rest of the night. As I left the theater, going out into the cool Napa night, I was singing "Velkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome" until I went to sleep.

"Cabaret" plays at Lucky Penny Community Arts Center through June 16. Tickets are between \$30 and \$40. You can purchase them at luckypennynapa.com.